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Wandering Strands of the Agca Plot

By Gordon Crovitz

The first two months of the papal assassination trial have been dominated by Mehmet Ali Agca assaulting his own credibility as a witness, claiming to be Christ and calling himself an "angel in human form." While he continues to assert that the Bulgarian defendants and ultimately the Soviets put him up to his crime, Presiding Judge Severino Santiapichi complains that Agca has "said everything and the opposite of everything."

There may or may not be a method to Agca's madness. Speculation on his motives ranges widely: He is merely grandstanding; he is trying to placate both the Italians and the Bulgarians; he has learned that even the pope doesn't want the Bulgarians implicated. Whatever motivates Agca, prosecutors are left with the task of assembling mostly circumstantial evidence to corroborate the Bulgarian connection. Agca will move off center stage and the corroborating evidence will take over in the new session of the trial resuming today.

It happens that Italian law allows more reliance on circumstantial evidence than do most other Western legal systems. This has been important in the earlier trials of terrorists in Italy, including the convictions in Judge Santiapichi's court of 23 Red Brigade members for killing former Prime Minister Aldo Moro. Whether or not the corroborating evidence ultimately results in a conviction of the three Bulgarian and four Turkish defendants, the new phase of the trial will provide a new focus. Having heard from the man who fired the shots, the public now will see the evidence from the exhaustive investigation that convinced Magistrate Ilario Martella that the Bulgarians were behind the shooting.

The confusion Agca caused at the opening of the trial, whatever its effect on the ultimate outcome, has certainly provided new openings for the Soviets and Bulgarians to push their own explanation. From the first, this has been to blame Western intelligence agencies. The Soviet-bloc line is that the Central Intelligence Agency got Agca to say that the Bulgarians and Soviets were behind the plot. It's instructive to trace the chronology and development of that line.

The Grey Wolves

A good starting place is the Bulgarian-language pamphlet "On the Wolf's Track," by Iona Andronov, which appeared a few months after Agca told Italian magistrates in spring 1982 that he had been hired for the job by the Bulgarian secret service. Mr. Andronov argued that in fact the CIA ordered the shooting and used the Grey Wolf organization, a group of Turkish terrorists, to do the dirty work. Mr. Martella had suggested that the Bulgarians, perhaps on Soviet orders, teamed up with the Grey Wolves, a mysterious group frequently described as "right wing."

A former Italian Communist Party member, Luigi Cavallo, picked up the Bulgarian position in a bulletin he publishes called Agencia A. In it, Mr. Cavallo has claimed since 1983 that the CIA arranged the papal shooting. Mr. Cavallo is a mysterious character—his newsletter has no subscribers, just recipients—and he is himself a fugitive from Italy, where he is sought on fraud charges.

Mr. Cavallo's French lawyer, Christian Roulette, was the next major proponent of the communist position. His "La Filiere" ("The Connection"), published in 1984, includes huge sections taken directly but without attribution from the Andronov pamphlet. Both publications cite purported cables from the U.S. Embassy in Rome published in July 1983 by Pace e Guerra, a leftist Italian newspaper, openly discussing the U.S. plot to blame the Bulgarians. The State Department responded that these alleged "cables" were in fact forgeries.

The plot then thickened to include a flamboyant Italian, Francesco Pazienza, who has been linked to two of Italy's greatest recent scandals. The first scandal was the discovery of P-2, an illegal Masonic lodge whose members included Gen. Giuseppe Santovito, head of SISMI, the Italian military secret service. Mr. Pazienza was his top aide and this scandal brought down the Christian Democratic government in 1981, causing Gen. Santovito to resign and Mr. Pazienza also to lose his intelligence job. He then became an associate of Roberto Calvi. Mr. Calvi's Banco Ambrosiano collapsed, the Vatican lost millions of dollars, and Mr. Pazienza became the subject of hundreds of articles and much speculation in the Italian press.

At that point, the communist tale of intrigue began to focus on Mr. Pazienza. Under the headline "The Amerikan [sic] Godfathers of SISMI," Paese Sera, a pro-Soviet Italian newspaper, claimed in October 1984 that the Italian military secret service was run by the CIA and that the Americans put Mr. Pazienza up to persuading Agca to say that he'd been recruited by the Bulgarians. The Paese Sera report and others that have followed in Europe and the U.S. say that Mr. Pazienza visited Agca in spring 1982 to tell the gunman he'd be freed by the Italian government if he fingered the communists.

The Paese Sera report appeared prior to an Agca mention of Mr. Pazienza in the courtroom on June 19. Judge Santiapichi pleaded to a noisy courtroom for patience—*pazienza* in Italian. Agca shouted, "Yes, Francesco Pazienza!" Agca went on to say that Mr. Pazienza had visited him in prison in the spring of 1982 and urged him to implicate the Bulgarians. Agca, who is known to follow press speculation about his case and may have seen the Paese Sera report, later retracted the Pazienza claim in court.

The original Agca remark, however, led to many stories in the Italian press, and some in the U.S. The U.S. socialist newspaper In These Times, for example, concluded that "Pazienza had all the right connections to have hatched the Bulgarian angle to Agca's crime." This claim was also picked up in the Spring 1985 edition of Covert Action Information Bulletin, a Washington-based newsletter that specialized in publishing the identity of CIA agents before Congress made deliberate efforts to expose U.S. agents a felony. It said Mr. Pazienza "reportedly visited Ascoli Piceno prison on several occasions during the period when Agca was gathering his thoughts in preparation for implicating the Bulgarians."

From his New York jail cell, where he is being held during extradition proceedings related to the Banco Ambrosiano case, Mr. Pazienza has been quoted in different ways on the plot. On July 15, a United Press International report quoted him as saying his alleged link to the pope story was a "classical story fabricated by the KGB." In conjunction with an Aug. 7-8 series in this newspaper by Jonathan Kwitny, Mr. Pazienza denied ever having met Agca, but was credited with supplying "information to the person who besides Mr. Agca is perhaps most associated with the issue: Claire Sterling." Mrs. Sterling has written a book detailing the Bulgarian connection.

The bulk of the Kwitny series described certain of Mr. Pazienza's activities as an intelligence agent. In 1980, one article reported, he helped an American journalist, Michael Ledeen, gather information on President Carter's brother Billy's link to Libya in what became "Billygate." Mr. Ledeen says Mr. Pazienza only helped him confirm a story he had already uncovered. Mr. Ledeen also rejected as "nonsense" claims by Richard Gardner, President Carter's ambassador to Italy, who was quoted as saying that Messrs. Pazienza and Ledeen took over U.S.-Italy relations.

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